
Bryony Randall and Jane Goldman (eds.). *Virginia Woolf in Context*. Literature in Context. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012, xviii + 502 pp., \$ 99.00 hc.

Today, an anthology titled *Virginia Woolf in Context* is inclined to raise interest as well as doubts. In view of the abounding research on Virginia Woolf, scholars tend to find unexplored niches in order to cast some fresh light on a writer about whom so much has already been said. For a new publication in the field of Woolf studies, a title as general and broad as *Virginia Woolf in Context* is thus surprising notwithstanding the fact that the book itself was published in a certain context, namely the renowned Cambridge University Press series “Literature in Context”. Considering the table of contents, it can be assumed that Susan Sellers’ *Cambridge Companion to Virginia Woolf* (2010) as well as Maggie Humm’s *Edinburgh Companion to Virginia Woolf and the Arts* (2010) already covered similar topics. Moreover, *Virginia Woolf: Texts and Contexts*, a selection of papers from the Fifth Annual Conference on Virginia Woolf, was published in 1996. In their excellent short preface, the editors point out why *Virginia Woolf in Context*, despite its resonances with earlier research, is in no way a redundant book. Randall and Goldman start by addressing the fundamental contradictions that historicising modernism always implies: first, modernity is considered as a literary period in the past while at the same time “inhabiting a perpetual present” (xi). Second, modernist texts clearly reflect their historical and cultural contexts but also withdraw from them in their “commitment to formalism and abstraction, aesthetics and textuality” (xi). Against this background, Randall and Goldman do not miss reflecting the practice of contextualizing as such and convincingly argue that “[c]ontextualizing Woolf cannot simply be an historical turn. It is simultaneously a writerly act caught up in textual processes” (xii). Had these very fruitful lines of thought been addressed and carried forward more explicitly in the individual contributions, the book as a whole would have gained greater coherence. Further, some positions articulated in the book even seem to pursue a quite different and

more limiting approach to historicising as it is formulated in the preface: in “Historicising Woolf: Context Studies”, Michael H. Whitworth for example claims that “[h]istoricising marks the recognition that something has been lost, that the text needs to be returned to its context in order to become intelligible” (3). This stance is problematic in several respects: it naively seems to presume that a ‘lost’ context can be re-established, disregarding the fact that the context attempted to be restored via writing changes in this very process. Moreover, suggesting that texts become more ‘intelligible’ through context may be an argument that misses its point when the texts in question are Virginia Woolf’s. Woolf herself often highlights that literary epiphanies happen to readers who do not necessarily understand what they are reading,¹ and hermeneutic decoding of meaning does not account for the poetic qualities of Woolf’s work. Whitworth’s statement may be considered as symptomatic for a tendency that can be observed throughout the book: While the preface situates Woolf’s texts in a field of tension between being deeply rooted in historical, social and cultural contexts and being highly self-reflexive, especially the second point tends to be neglected in most of the articles. This to some degree prevents putting the text-external contexts in a relation to Woolf’s specific poetics, which seems essential to the book’s endeavour. An outstanding exception is Derek Ryan’s text, in which connections between Woolf’s writing and contemporary physics as well as philosophy are established on the basis of rigorous close readings of *The Waves*. The insights gained, for example that Woolf’s writing as well as “quantum philosophy-physics” (364) are determined by intra-actions, are then carried forward to a discussion of what this means for interceptions between Woolf’s contemporary context and our contemporary context. Ryan convincingly concludes that “[c]ontextualizing Woolf is not only about looking at the contemporaneous events, ideas, people, and texts that may have influenced her work, but also looking at how she is intra-acting with our own contemporary debates” (371).

In general, the highly informed and well-investigated contributions by prominent Woolf scholars are supremely valuable in themselves, offering intriguing insights and inviting further investigations. The first part of the book, “Theory and Critical Reception”, focuses on the contexts Woolf’s writings have been put in in the course of their reception history. A number of articles exceed a mere portrayal of the theoretical and critical contexts Woolf has been situated in and indeed manage to constitute an “intervention in live and current debate” (xii). Thus, some most obvious critical contexts appear in a fresh light. In her very

1 Cf. Mrs. Ramsay’s reading scene in *To the Lighthouse* and Rachel Vinrace’s reaction to the poetry read to her by Terence Hewet in *The Voyage Out*.

insightful contribution, Bryony Randall for example investigates, reflects and questions Virginia Woolf's position in modernist studies. Given that Woolf decidedly embraced "the marginal, peripheral and non-institutionalised", Randall concludes that Woolf's prominent role in the modernist canon "makes her particularly apt to keep challenging the very definition she continually contributes to constructing" (37). Also Sanja Bahun's text "Woolf and Psychoanalytic Theory" sketches a promising aim. Instead of following prominent but problematic approaches that apply psychoanalysis to literary texts as a hermeneutic means, Bahun wants to correlate "the function of psychoanalysis in material history with Woolf's textual practice" (93). Patricia Morgne Cramer's questioning of queer theory's take on Virginia Woolf in "Woolf and Theories of Sexuality", even as it may not be convincing in every respect, raises important questions: does queer theory impose models of sexuality on Woolf's texts which did not exist in the same way in Woolf's time? Does a postulation of same-sex emotion necessarily result in fixed 'lesbian' identity which queer theory would consider as restrictive? Or may a specific lesbian body be lost in a radically queer conception?

In the second part of the book, historical and cultural contexts are investigated. Even though the distinction between the two parts is convincing as such, it sometimes remains unclear why certain contributions are assigned to one or the other. This becomes obvious with articles that are thematically related like Perry Meisel's "Woolf and Freud: The Kleinian Turn" and Sanja Bahun's "Woolf and Psychoanalytic Theory". Especially Madelyn Detloff's intriguing investigation of Woolf and lesbian culture from a perspective of queer theory would have constituted a more direct response to Patricia Morgne Cramer's criticism of queer theory with respect to Woolf studies if the articles had been placed next to each other. The strength of the second part of the book is on the one hand the wide range of yet unexplored historical and cultural contexts and on the other the fruitful reassessments of contexts that have already been broadly examined. In that regard, the choice of the articles is praiseworthy. Instead of publishing another study on Woolf and painting, for example, one can find a text on Woolf and music, a topic that has been widely under-explored. Emma Sutton's informed and solid research paves the way for further investigations of Woolf's writing and music. The article announcing the most thoroughly explored context in Woolf studies, "Woolf's Bloomsbury", offers a strikingly new focus: Kathryn Simpson outlines how Bloomsbury brought about a negotiation of economics in the artistic circle. She analyses the strategies artists developed in order to be able "to make a living without capitulating to market forces" (171), that is, to confront capitalist society in a way productive for themselves. Also E. H. Wright's text on Woolf and theatre, concentrating on Woolf's self-staging and life-performance in her letters and diaries opens new vistas. Other preeminent contributions are Judith Allen's

“Feminist Politics: ‘Repetition’ and ‘Burning’ in *Three Guineas* (Making it New)” and Vassiliki Kolocotroni’s “Strange Cries and Ancient Songs: Woolf’s Greek and the Politics of Intelligibility”. Kolocotroni points out that Woolf often thematises or deploys Greek in the context of “unintelligibility” and “sounds of otherness” (246). Thereby, her writing does not only revere and reverberate a “remoteness at the heart of language” (427), but also takes up a political stance. Going back to Jacques Rancière, Kolocotroni argues that the obscure Greek words or sounds have the potential of a re-distribution of the perceptible. Starting from the striking observation that in the frequently discussed passage from *Three Guineas* on burning the word ‘feminism’, the word ‘word’ is almost excessively repeated, Allen sketches a poetics of “destruction and potential regeneration” (193). In her wonderful reflection of the relation between repetition and context informed by a detailed analysis of the passage of *Three Guineas* and a consultation of other texts by Woolf, she shows how repetition and reinvention go hand in hand. Allen also does not miss to discuss what this means for her own text which is rooted in a different context than Woolf’s and I want to close my review with the question she poses: “Which contextual forces come to the fore, at differing times, by different readers – interacting with existent contexts – and how are they assessed and evaluated? And by whom?” (194)

Stefanie Heine, Universität Zürich
E-Mail: stefanie.heine@uzh.ch